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“K”

Wot sets the Colonel cravin' for a just-so rank and file?
Wot makes the Sergeant's swearin' so particularly vile?
It ain't his blamed anxiety to keep the Rooshian out;
It's a 'orrid sort o' feelin' of a K somew'ere about.

It's K—yus; K.

An' there's none to say 'im nay.

There's a flutter in the dovescotes w'en like Nemysis 'e stalks.
'E's a corker, and an 'ero, and a bogey man, they say,
For 'e's always hup *an'* doin' while the others sits and talks.

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The truth wrapped in the final line of this oft-quoted topical song of “K. Atkins in India” was the central truth of the life which has come to so dramatically tragic a close off the Orkneys. Earl Kitchener was not England's foremost soldier,—if only on the ground once taken by Moltke, that he had never been called upon to endure the supreme test of conducting a retreat. That he was the greatest military administrator of his country is generally granted, however; even, perhaps, the greatest of the world to-day.

As the conqueror of the Soudan, after years of silent, relentless organizing for victory; as the author and director of the scattered and complex operations that finally wore down to defeat the pertinacious Boers; as the remodeller of the military forces of British India; as the adviser to Australia and New Zealand and Canada on schemes of national and imperial defence; as Cromer's worthy successor in the Nile Valley, playing Proconsul even while he figured as “teacher of the infant class” of uneasy natives; as—above all else!—the silent force which prepared unprepared England in the present world struggle, raising by voluntary enlistment an army of close upon four million men, training them, transporting them over-seas with a loss of less than one per cent,—it was in these gigantic employments rather than by personal successes in the field or signal exhibitions of generalship that he earned the gratitude of his native land and the admiration of others.

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A good look at the man—the whole six feet, two inches, of him; red-cheeked and "swivel-eyed,"—and one knew him a bit slow, a bit dull, possibly (in social ways), but infinitely sure. Indifference to popular opinion showed all over him. It was unthinkable that he should ever seek self-advertisement. The entire look was stern, yet, somehow, convincingly just.

His twin gospels were Work and Obedience. Supremely self-confident, he could forgive anything sooner than faint-heartedness in those about him. Sympathy was by no means so foreign to him as the untrue "Kitchener legend" would try to persuade us, but it was an intelligent sympathy, seldom misplaced, never "working over-time." If he demanded much, he was genuinely, albeit unemotionally, appreciative, and men achieved the impossible at his word. "Twelve hours in which to carry this dispatch? You must do it in six." And the officer who had asked for twelve did it in five.

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From the very first, the Kitchener traits have been written clear for those with seeing eyes to read the story. They appeared in '74, appeared unmistakably, when Lieutenant Kitchener was sent out to Palestine, second in command of a survey party. There for four years he showed indomitable energy, consistent thoroughness, a hunger for work with mastery of its detail, resource, preparedness, economy in men and material, and a high sense of duty.

Twenty years later, in Egypt, the same tale was told more markedly; retold with such emphasis as two decades' experience and confidence had necessarily brought with them. Kitchener was preparing to reconquer the Soudan, and therein furnished all and sundry what has been called "an unsurpassed exhibition of one-man power in the organization and conduct of war." Wolseley had planned to maintain his communications by a service of Canadian flatboats on the Nile. Other generals had thought and talked in terms of camel corps. Kitchener built a railway across the sands as he advanced, built more than seven hundred miles of it, and at Omdurman for his rail-heads drew on the Mahdi's army of 50,000 to a hopeless assault. Eleven thousand fanatics fell on the field, 16,000 were wounded, above

4,200 taken prisoners. Mahdism was ended within three hours, —the ripe result of intelligent planning, patient waiting, and the hardest sort of work. It was just "K."

Certainly, too, it was a man with a very human heart and an understanding mind, as well as of a sense of the drama of a great occasion, who signalized his entry into Khartoum by holding a solemn service in memory of the murdered Gordon, and who, on his return to England, asked his countrymen for funds to found a college wherein the sons of the Dervish chieftains, whom he had fought and overwhelmed, might be educated in the knowledge of the West. Here, indeed, was one who "terribly carpets the earth with dead" and then "calls the living by twos and threes, and summons their children to school."

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In the South African war the strategy that turned the tide in favor of the British was the aged Roberts, but Lord Kitchener, with his "squares of operation," his reconcentration, his paralleling and converging columns, his patrolling of 3,000 miles of railway, his gathering up of horses, his seizure of supplies, till nothing was left for the smallest commando to live upon, his hard blows, his firmness yet justness, his genius for negotiation,—"K. of K." was the man who really finished the trying war.

And what a tribute that was which came to him at Vereeniging! As the gathered leaders, of both sides, rose from the table where, to all intents and purposes, the definitive result of four years bloodshed had at last been reached, the Boer veterans burst into a spontaneous cheer for the foeman they had found so honorable in conciliation, even as they had learned him iron-handed and unrelenting in the field.

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Just before Kitchener was recalled from Egypt to take charge of the War Office, with the Atrocious War not yet a fortnight old, W. J. Lampton, all unforeseeing of what lay so close ahead, jingled off a stanza of what he calls his "rail-fence poetry" for a New York daily. At this moment its flippancy may seem to sound off the key, and yet it tells too sharply too simple a truth to be wholly out of place :—

Gee whiz!
 What a quiet man he is!
 He goes around
 Without any sound.
 And he never blows
 About what he knows,
 And he cuts no capers
 In the newspapers,
 And he doesn't try
 To tell people how to live or die.
 And he doesn't want to show
 The whole world how to go.
 And he doesn't fight
 To get into the lime-light.
 And—and—oh, say,
 What kind of a great man is he anyway?
 Where is his paraphernalia?
 Where is his glittering brass?
 Where are his banners and cohorts?
 Where is his glory? Alas!
 He keeps them away from the public,
 His record is hidden from view,
 And nobody hears him telling
 Of what he has done or will do.
 And yet, by gum!
 He is not dumb,
 And he's been going some
 Along several ways
 That count in these strenuous days.

It is a loss to the onward march of human endeavor that all these verbs now must be rewritten in the past tense. “K” was a man genuinely great. Shall one not add, too, that he was genuinely happy,—in that he died at his post in the performance of his duty, and that his splendid work had been practically completed?

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